Teachers’ attitudes to teaching aids and authentic materials

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1. Introduction

When used effectively, authentic materials help bring the real world into the classroom and significantly enliven the ESL (English Second Language) class.

(Kelly, Kelly, Offner, Vorland, 2002)

Traditionally, most English teachers have conducted their teaching mainly through conventional teaching aids, such as textbooks and accessories. Today, however, many opt for dropping textbooks partially or altogether in favor of using authentic materials in the classroom. This study will examine this change in patterns by looking at how four English teachers approach the phenomenon of choosing teaching materials for their lessons.

One day when I was in fifth grade, a friend showed me a science-fiction book written by famous American author Jack Vance. It had an interesting cover that immediately caught my interest. However, there was a problem: the book was in English. Up till that point English had not been one of my stronger subjects in school. In fact, I dreaded English classes because I felt that I could not express myself and I often ended up tongue-tied. Nevertheless, the book looked so exciting that I decided that I would read it no-matter-what. It turned out to be the first part of a series called The Planet of Adventures, and ever since that day the majority of the books I read are in English. I could be asking myself why reading a lot of books in English has been so beneficial to me, but I believe I’ve known the answer since my early teens. I subjected myself to the language and I learned more from deducting the meaning of words and expressions from context rather than through glossaries. This helped me a lot by expanding my vocabulary and increasing my feeling for the language. Apart from my own experiences, I have had the pleasure of reading short essays written by grades four to six students that were taught English through the use of authentic materials and compare their products with those of high-school students that received classic, textbook-based teaching throughout the years. The results were astounding as the younger students produced results that were sometimes on par with or better than those of the high-school students.

Why do some teachers choose to use authentic material over classic textbooks and vice versa? What makes some teachers drop textbooks and associated resources in favor of materials that are not specifically created for teaching English to second-language (L2) students? Why do others employ both techniques, shifting back and forth between them in
their teaching, while a third group will not integrate virtually any authentic material? These are some of the questions that this thesis tries to answer.

2. Problem Statement

For ages teachers and researchers have debated how to accomplish the most effective language teaching and they are not likely to stop anytime soon. Many believe that the materials used in the English classroom, and the way that they are presented and dealt with by the teacher, correlates directly with how well students are able to increase their language proficiency. As stated in the introduction, the notion of dropping traditional teaching aids in favor of bringing in more authentic materials in the classroom has become more and more common. Thus, focusing on classical teaching aids versus authentic materials, the objective of this thesis is to study and understand how and why four English teachers choose what resources to use in their teaching and how they think that their choices benefit the students.

3. Literature Review

In this chapter I present arguments for and against authentic materials and course books and their accessories as well as a discussion dealing with the nature of authenticity. A fair portion is devoted to Stephen D Krashen and his research into acquisition of language. I have chosen to lay extra focus on dealing with his hypotheses on second-language acquisition because I believe that they tie very well into what some of my interviewees say.

3.1 Graded texts and course books vs. authentic materials

In his book *Läsa på främmande språk*, Bo Lundahl argues that graded texts (texts that are modified to suit certain levels of language skill) in most shapes and forms represent a dated view on reading skills and language development, which is that all students are supposed to learn at a similar pace. The idea is that you should learn in steps, starting out slowly and then increasing the level of difficulty (Lundahl, 1998).

In his article “Materials and Methods: Need they be in conflict?”, George Vassilakis levels some rather harsh criticism against course books and their accessories. He claims that “[the] sheer number of components available suggests that the course book package is offered as a complete course that should not be in need of supplementation”
(Vassilakis, 1997). The intention is to provide a complete solution to teaching and learning English. They ensure uniformity in what takes place in the classroom and teachers end up prevented from “identifying with classroom events by turning [the teacher] into a transmitter of content.” Thus the teacher’s planning and out-of-classroom work is reduced to determining overall goals of the language-learning program. Also, modern pedagogy stresses that classroom teaching should emanate from learner needs. This, however, is effectively impossible with a course book since it needs to cater to a broad array of learners whose language skills and needs are bound to vary. Some course books contain authentic materials that some would claim lend more freedom to teachers in terms of lesson planning. Vassilakis draws a parallel to what Widdowson (see below) says about authenticity and underlines that it does not matter if a course book contains authentic materials (unaltered texts not designed for use in the classroom) because in the eyes of the students it is all part of the course book. Let us see what advantages course books have to offer.

Julio Foppoli notes that graded textbooks are especially useful when teachers want to focus on a specific language structure and subject students to it. Every single context will contain elements of the structure in question, which will enable students to make inferences on how they are used (Foppoli, 2006). Another argument for course books is that students can in fact make sense of their contents as opposed to authentic materials, which tend to present more linguistic difficulties. It is not certain however that all intentional simplifications make a text easier to read and comprehend and they may in fact have a negative effect on the understanding of context and on the sheer enjoyment of the text. Lundahl takes note of the most common criticism against graded books: The cover and the introduction of the book tell the reader that it is graded and therefore a schoolbook. Authentic books appeal more to students because they come off as ‘real’, partly because their covers and general design are more diverse and unique. Textbooks are written with the intention to improve learning within certain skill levels. Therefore story and context are not as important here as in authentic texts. As a comparison, textbooks for L2 learners are about increasing learning while books for native speakers are about characters, feelings, experiences and opinions. Moreover, course books and graded readers that simplify and remove descriptive language can appear synthetic and uninteresting to read. Graded readers retain the main stories and events of the original texts while at the same time simplifying language in a grammatical as well as descriptive sense, hence stripping them of literary qualities (Lundahl, 1998).
Professional authors and writers write authentic books and texts and therefore the quality of these works is higher than that of graded readers and textbooks. The chance that readers will be immersed in the story is subsequently greater with authentic materials. Foppoli has similar ideas and states that authentic materials provide students with actual everyday language. On the other hand, he argues, sometimes authentic materials are quite teacher-unfriendly and may demand hours of preparation before they are useful. Lundahl adds to these fears claming that it is possible to take the arguments for authentic materials too far, rendering them elitist. He also says that there is a good chance that a lot of students will not enjoy classics or ‘literary’ works.

Is there then a case for a mixture of the two schools of teaching? Foppoli thinks so, especially if teachers cannot allocate enough time for researching and preparing authentic materials. In this case he recommends a balanced approach in which teachers use prepared materials to introduce certain topics and then present interesting authentic materials that delve deeper into these topics (Foppoli, 2006).

3.2 Authentic materials and authenticity

Defining authenticity is not a task to be taken lightly. Just because a novel subscribes to the traits commonly associated with authenticity does not automatically mean that it is authentic, at least not according to some theorists. There are and have been clear differences of opinion on the subject for many years. Before I describe the different standpoints, I’d like to present the common and uncomplicated view of what characterizes authentic materials: “[M]aterials that were created, or at least appear to have been created, for the use and enjoyment of people who are not studying English as a Second Language”(Shendoa University, 2006). I have chosen this broad explanation to represent what authentic materials in this paper mean. Examples include newspapers, novels, movies and TV broadcasts. Some, however, believe that authenticity is derived from consumer experience.

Michael Breen, known for his theories on authenticity, describes four types of authenticity that differ depending on what the teacher’s goal with the material is. One is the authenticity of the texts that we may use as input data for learners, which corresponds to how authenticity is defined above. The second type takes into account the learner’s own interpretation of texts: Does s/he understand it as it was meant to be understood? If so, the material is authentic to the learner regardless of its origin. The third type deals with how materials are actually used in language teaching. Do the teacher’s methods make proper use of
The fourth and last type deals with the social situation in the language classroom, meaning that the contexts that teachers create in conjunction with materials have to be relevant. Hutchingson & Waters summarizes Breen’s ideas by stating that authenticity is not a characteristic of a text, film or newspaper in itself; it is a feature of a creation in a particular context and it can only be authentic in the context that it was originally created for (Taylor, 1994). Widdowson has a slightly different take on the matter. He argues that authenticity is entirely defined by the consumer. According to him, a material’s authenticity depends on the consumer’s perception of the genuineness of the material and whether or not s/he is able to react according to what is actually expressed in the material. The problem, claims Widdowson, is that second-language learners have a harder time understanding the nuances of a foreign language and therefore the whole concept of authenticity in language learning is merely an illusion. Lundahl concludes that authenticity is a difficult term to use and proceeds to argue that it is a practical way of distinguishing between materials that have or have not been produced specifically for learning purposes (Lundahl, 1998).

3.3 Krashen’s hypotheses on L2 acquisition

Stephen D Krashen has had a enormous impact on how many teachers reason regarding what is commonly referred to as learning. What is interesting is that Krashen talks about learning and acquisition, in his view two completely different things in how they are accomplished and what ends they serve. In conjunction with these concepts, Krashen has formulated five hypotheses that explain what factors influence how individuals develop their language proficiencies.

3.3.1 The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis

According to Krashen, adults have two ways of developing second-language competency. The first is referred to as acquisition and is not unlike how children develop its language skills. It is a subconscious process during which language is acquired through being subjected to it over time. Instead of using reason to produce or analyze a sentence, for example, we end up using language that ‘sounds’ and ‘feels’ right. The second is learning, which refers to knowledge that has been consciously attained through explicit study of the rules of a language, its grammar. In this case we will be able to tell that a sentence is correct or corrupt based on sheer knowledge rather than a feeling (Krashen, 1987).
3.3.2 The Natural Order Hypothesis

Research has shown that acquisition of grammatical structures follow a certain, predictable pattern. For example, Brown was able to show that the progressive marker *ing* and the plural *s* were among the first grammatical morphemes that children pick up as first-language learners. On the other hand, the genitive *s* and the third-person *s* were not acquired until much later. Brown was also able to demonstrate that the earlier or later morphemes were acquired, the easier or harder they were to master. Later on, Dulay and Burt found evidence suggesting that children acquiring a second-language also picked up grammatical morphemes in a certain order, although not completely corresponding to that of the children acquiring their first language (Krashen, 1985).

3.3.3 The Monitor Hypothesis

With this hypothesis, Krashen explains how acquisition and learning are used in second-language performance. Competency stemming from acquisition controls our ability to be more or less fluent while learning acts as an editorial function that tries to prevent us from making mistakes while communicating. Krashen calls the latter a Monitor. Sometimes it activates before we start a means of communication, sometimes afterwards.

There are three kinds of Monitor users: The over-users, the under-users and the optimal users. The over-users monitor their language continuously in order to avoid making mistakes. This is problematic due to the fact that their ability for fluency is severely hampered in the process. Conversely, the under-user cares less about correctness and has a tendency not to be influenced by error-correction. While fluency may not be a problem, the level of produced mistakes usually is. According to Krashen, the goal of language teachers should be to produce optimal Monitor users for their ability to balance Monitor usage. They are able to keep it shut off during ordinary conversations that demand spontaneous actions and reactions since it would only interfere under such circumstances. On the other hand, the Monitor comes very handy in writing or for planned speeches. This lets the optimal user use the best of his or her acquired and learned language skills (Krashen, 1987).
3.3.4 The Input Hypothesis

According to the Input Hypothesis, our language abilities progress along the natural order (as described in the Natural Order Hypothesis) through processing language structures that are somewhat beyond our current level of competency. If $i$ represents our current level, we acquire $i + 1$, the $1$ representing structures that we do not yet master, by understanding comprehensible input containing $i + 1$. Context provides the key to deciphering $i$ as we are able to figure out its meaning through the circumstances surrounding it, which includes extra-linguistic information - our knowledge of the world. Krashen points out that this way looking upon improving language skills is in direct contrast with traditional pedagogy where language structures are learned and then practiced in communication (Krashen, 1987).

3.3.5 The Affective Filter Hypothesis

“Comprehensible input is necessary for acquisition, but it is not sufficient. The acquirer must be ‘open’ to the input” (Krashen, 1987, p.2). Research has shown that a number of factors, depending on how prevalent they are in the acquirer, facilitate or obstruct acquisition. Krashen brings up three factors:

1. **Motivation:** Highly motivated acquirers usually do better in second-language acquisition.

2. **Self-confidence:** Acquirers with self-confidence and a positive self-image commonly do better in second-language acquisition.

3. **Anxiety:** Low levels of anxiety in acquirers increase their ability for acquisition.

The Affective Filter is a product of the presence of these three factors in acquirers. A high Affective Filter, which obstructs acquisition, is derived from unmotivation, lacking self-confidence and high levels of anxiety. The opposite is true for a low Affective Filter which facilitates acquisition. Krashen suggests that the filter is lowest when “the acquirer is so involved in the message that he temporarily ‘forgets’ he is hearing or reading another language” (Krashen, 1987).

3.4 Krashen’s take on teaching grammar

Krashen does not believe that examining irregularities, formulating rules or teaching complex facts is language teaching. Instead, he prefers to look upon it as “language appreciation” or linguistics. However, there are situations when teaching grammar can result in language
acquisition. For this to happen, students must be interested in the subject and the target language used as a medium of instruction. The focus of the students must be on what is being talked about and not how it is done. This demands that the teacher is skilful enough to present complexities in the target language so that the students are able to focus on what is being talked about rather than how it is done. However, Krashen believes that teachers and students alike deceive themselves, thinking that the study of grammar itself is responsible for the students’ progress while it is really a result of the medium rather than the message (Ricardo, 2005). Next we shall examine some of the critique aimed at Krashen’s theories.

3.5 Critique of Krashen’s theories on second-language acquisition

Starting out by looking at arguments against Krashen’s idea of acquisition versus learning, some critics say that teaching by immersion does not provide students with a firm grasp of grammatical structures. While they are good at reading and listening, they lack in their ability to produce well-formed utterances and texts at native-speaker level. The reasons behind this would seem to be derived from that fact that students are not always expected to speak in full sentences; meaning can most of the time be extracted from context without any further effort to fully grasp it; the lack of formal lessons during which language rules are taught results in students’ lack of attention to the need for correct syntactic form (Mason, 2006).

The Natural Order Hypothesis also receives flak from some that claim that it “oversimplifies the cognitive processes of learning, and draws too rigid a distinction between acquisition and learning...is based mainly on the observation of learners acquiring an L2 that is generally used in the surrounding environment – that is immigrants to the US learning English.” (Mason, 2006).

Other criticism focuses on the Input Hypothesis and claims that it is not all clear what Krashen means by ‘comprehensible output’. Sometimes it would seem that he is referring to so-called caretaker language (also known as Motherese, teacher talk and foreigner talk) which is tuned to the learner’s current competency, while on other occasions stressing the need for scaffolding of environmental clues, such as pictures, gestures and objects that make the meaning clear. In the first case, input is made comprehensible by modifying language while it is the context (the environment) that is modified in the second case. Using caretaker language could be hazardous since students might feel that they are being talked down to. Moreover,
extensive use of environmental scaffolding and clues runs the risk of eliminating the need to bother to master the language.

Another issue that some have with Krashen is his focus on input contra output. As we saw above in the Input Hypothesis, students develop their L2 skills when they are fed $i+1$. However, how are teachers supposed to know for certain what constitutes $i$ and $+1$ when student output is clearly secondary to input? A problem of choosing appropriate materials arises. Jacqueline Boulouffe suggests that if teachers stick to the input method, learners will only understand the language at a superficial level. Therefore, in order to learn it at a higher level, learners need struggle and work with the demands of self-expression (Mason, 2006).

4. Methods

This thesis constitutes a qualitative case study of four English teachers. Data collection was achieved through separate interviews. According to Johansson & Svedner, qualitative research strives to describe and understand separate and unique cases and circumstances rather than seeking explanations to general inquiries, which is an accurate description of what this thesis is trying to accomplish (Svedner, Johansson, 2006). Interviewees were not chosen at complete random. Instead I chose four teachers whom I was under the impression had different backgrounds and different opinions on the topic. This course of action was due to the fact that I would not risk including teachers that potentially harbored the exact same attitudes towards choice of teaching materials in the classroom. Furthermore, interviewees will be referred to by fictitious names throughout the thesis due to reasons of integrity and ethics.

Susan K Soy points out that interviews are usually preceded by a literature review that helps establishing what questions need addressing (Soy, 2006). However, in this case I felt it would be more appropriate to conduct the literature review after the interviews. The reason was that there is not a lot of published literature dealing with the topic of this thesis, along with the fact that there was no way of knowing in advance what information the interviewees would yield. Another deciding factor that influenced how the interviews were conducted was the qualitative approach.

Johansson & Svedner state that qualitative interviews aim at staying within a certain area of interest without keeping to a strict manuscript (Svedner, Johansson, 2006). I thus concluded that interviews could not be conducted by sticking to a set of detailed questions. Instead, they had to be performed in the manner of informal conversations where the interviewees’ answers would dictate the appropriate follow-up questions, also as described
by Johansson & Svedner. To my aid I had a loose interview guide to facilitate getting the interviews back on track if focus was lost. With the interviewees’ consent, I recorded everything on a portable MP3 player. I opted for recording our conversations rather than taking notes since I wanted to be able to go through the interviews over and over again in their original state. Once the interviews were concluded I began working on determining what theories would be of interest for analyzing the results.

5. Results

Among my four interviewees, one is from the UK while the other three are from Sweden. Paula teaches grades four to nine, Irene four to six, Bengt ten to twelve and Jens seven to nine. Paula and Irene are more or less devoted users of authentic materials, Bengt uses authentic materials parallel to textbooks and Jens mainly sticks to textbooks in his teaching.

5.1 Paula

Born and raised in England, Paula later ended up in Sweden and begun a career as a home language teacher. Many of her students were in pre-school and her own children were also very young at the time. She noticed early on how well you could approach the language by using children's books, nursery rhymes, singing, fairy tales and recorded materials. It felt to her like a beneficial way of teaching, and eventually it became the obvious and natural way of doing it. At that point in time, her classes consisted of very few students and she found that she was very conscious about seeking out authentic materials to base her lessons on. Later she would move on to teach older children, as stated in the introduction.

Paula eventually came in contact with Bo Lundahl's book, Läs på främmande språk. She contacted and spoke to Lundahl, a professor at the Malmö School of Education, about teaching English through authentic materials in regular school classes. Lundahl was not her only source of inspiration, however, as she had a colleague in Malmö who had good experiences with authentic materials. She found that if you use fitting books, “you can use them in a class and the interest [is] very great among the students.” She also discovered that books that were normally used for ages five to six in her home country could be used successfully with slightly older children in Swedish schools. Let us now see where these events have landed her today.

In order to make the language more accessible to her students, Paula's idea when looking for suitable novels for her classes is that they meet certain criteria. Depending to a
certain degree on the age group that she is planning lessons for, she tries to find books that contain pictures, that are written in rhyme and that contain specific vocabulary. She creates pre and post-reading activities that involve writing dialogues as opposed to handing out the common task of writing book reviews, mostly because she believes the latter does not allow for enough creativity. For older children, she likes to use newspaper articles as they take a larger interest in the affairs of the world than younger children usually do. Paula continuously scans the media for interesting tidbits that can be used in class. However, she is quick to point out that a number of textbooks do indeed use authentic texts (Kangaroo from Studentliteratur being one good example) and that teachers should not dismiss standard teaching aids all together. She makes a point of mentioning how she does not believe in flattened texts, otherwise known as adapted readers, which make a point of filtering out difficult language and grammar, although she admits that they serve a purpose for learners with lesser linguistic ability.

However, lack of time can sometimes be a factor, and that is when designed teaching aids can come especially handy. “You don't always have to re-invent the wheel”, she says. Does Paula think that using authentic materials in the classroom is a fool-proof method for success? No, it is all about how the material is presented to the class, she says, and adds that this goes for any material a teacher chooses to use. She proceeds to argue that the primary advantages of using authentic materials is that they are more interesting and diverse in terms of themes, sport a wider range of vocabulary and they provide the teacher with an unlimited set of options for activities. She also says that textbooks underestimate students’ abilities to learn vocabulary.

What, in the end, determines why she uses authentic material? While being inspired by Lundahl and her colleague earlier on in her career, these days she feels that she is doing it mainly because she is enjoying herself. She reasons that it is because she is a native speaker that she finds flattened texts to be especially uninspiring. Interestingly, she does not really deal in terms of better or not - it is simply more enjoyable for the students to work with authentic materials. Hence she is a supporter of the notion that students learn more when they are enjoying themselves and “[you] can’t expect your students to enjoy things if you don't enjoy them yourself.”

She takes pleasure in the challenge of creating lessons from authentic materials since they demand more creativity to be successful. “When you're an experienced teacher, you have all the theories of learning in your backbone and you know how to explain grammar. So you can do that as it comes up rather than having it in a structured form.” According to Paula, another advantage is that “You get students to use dictionaries instead of prepared word lists.”
“The kids produce better, certainly written [materials] [by working with authentic materials]…They are writing and you correct their mistakes as you go.”

5.2 Bengt

Before Bengt goes into detail about his experiences of authentic materials, he makes clear that there are a number of factors that have to be taken into account before you decide what materials are appropriate for use in the classroom. First of all, you have to check the course objectives in Förordning om 1994 års läroplan för de frivilliga skolformerna (Lpf94) to make sure you cover all the areas that the students are supposed to learn. Once that is done, you should aim at providing a varied experience for the students that incorporates speaking, reading and writing. It is also important to take into account what program the students are attending so that the material they are presented with is relevant to their future professions. Having a lot of experience with students whose education is preparing them for a job straight after leaving high school, he says that some materials can be purchased while a lot of authentic material can actually be acquired from colleagues teaching the practical subjects. For example, there are manuals and pamphlets from companies such as Volvo and Scania that provide interesting learning opportunities. Some companies even provide guides aimed at instructing teachers how to use their technical materials in the classroom. Meanwhile, it is also important that theoretical portions of the language are not overlooked, and this is where textbooks are especially useful according to Bengt. However, being an avid reader of magazines and newspapers, he is also a believer of their uses in the classroom. *Newsweek*, for example, is full of interesting articles that he likes to use now and then. He says that he is trying to cater to the students’ interests. Finding resources that appeal to them is paramount, both in terms of authentic materials and textbooks.

He does point out, however, that it is not always easy to find textbooks that work well in the classroom. Part of it is an economical issue, as if you make a mistake you are stuck with a bad textbook and more or less forced to make the best of the situation until the books are worn out. In conclusion, Bengt advocates a diverse approach to teaching, both when it comes to what materials to use and how to use them. He tries to have varied lessons to keep things interesting. During evenings Bengt plans for how to incorporate grammar, writing, speaking and listening in class the next day. He claims that students feel they accomplish the most if they get to practice all aspects of the language. However, there are times when you have to
deviate from this scheme and work with themes, which is a field where he feels that authentic materials really come into their own.

Does Bengt think you can teach successfully without incorporating any kinds of authentic materials except that which can be found in certain textbooks? What about completely ignoring textbooks? Yes, teaching can be done without textbooks according to him, but it would be very cumbersome for teachers to have to spend hours upon hours gathering authentic materials. However, he states that “Teaching can not be done exclusively through textbooks since the course objectives [Lpf94] state that you need skills that are hard to acquire if you neglect to incorporate authentic materials.” Moreover, he thinks that “It would be too tedious to teach by means of textbooks only.”

5.3 Irene

Roughly 15 years ago Irene had an experience that would forever change the way she teaches English. A new semester had just begun but the new English textbooks had not arrived yet. Instead of turning to old textbooks for backup, she chose to work with fairy-tales as she had good knowledge of them from reading a lot to her own children back in the day. Activities included listening, reading, acting out scenes and students composing their own materials through writing, dialogs and drawings. At first, however, before letting students work on their own, she would make sure that the fairy-tales were properly introduced to create interest and motivation. When the textbooks finally arrived, Irene felt that her students had made a lot of progress by working with the fairy-tales and it was her impression that they had enjoyed it a lot, just as she had. Then the day came when the textbooks arrived, but she never handed them out.

Examining the textbook’s contents, she concluded that working with the fairy tales had provided a lot more opportunities for her students to improve. Going back to the textbook would have been, as she calls it, “unfair” and like “taking a huge step backwards.” As a result she decided to proceed on the path that was originally going to be nothing more than a temporary solution. Since then she has completely dropped the textbooks in favor of authentic materials. She states that the key to success in the classroom is enjoying what you are doing, both from a teacher and student perspective. By, for example, dramatizing fairytales or coming up with their own dialogues in groups, her students seem to enjoy themselves a lot and Irene reasons that this is when they are able to acquire the most skills. “They forget that they are in a situation where they are supposed to learn something. Instead
of trying to memorize words, phrases and grammar, they end up assimilating the language by subjecting themselves to it and using it actively”, she says.

Interestingly, she feels that she is teaching English that is even above her own level as students regularly come across facets of the language that she is not familiar with herself. However, she does not see this as a problem as it only encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning, which in turn has a greater chance of creating a genuine interest in the language. She says, “In my mind there is nothing they can not do, and that is the mindset that I am trying to convey to them as well.” Also, there is a good chance that she herself will pick up something useful in the process, as dealing with authentic materials usually means treading in less familiar territories than you do in textbooks. Irene argues that using authentic materials as a base for teaching English opens up the classroom in terms of student interaction and cooperation. She noticed early on that students were naturally inclined to seeking each other’s help to overcome obstacles and create solutions to problems. Over the years she has learnt how to create classroom situations where students feel comfortable speaking English among themselves – a common problem for language learners.

5.4 Jens

Jens is a grades 6-9 teacher who has been working for five years. Of my four interviewees, he is the one with the least experience of using authentic materials. Textbooks and textbook supplements have so far constituted the basis for his English teaching since he feels that they provide the students with most of the elements that are important if one is to follow Förordning om 1994 års läroplan för de obligatoriska skolformerna (Lpo94). According to Jens, textbooks let students practice all aspects of the language, especially reading and grammar. However, he admits that they have their limitations as it is clearly stated in Lpo94 that students need additional skills for which textbooks do not provide learning opportunities.

Television has always been one of Jens’s interests and he has found that using it in the classroom is an effective way of exposing students to native-quality English. Interestingly since he seldom puts the textbook aside, he reasons that a lot of students these days get their main English skills from out-of-school activities, such as television, films, music, and computer games. Although there are times when he leaves out the textbooks in favor of some form of televised material, Jens feels that there is more he could do for his students. He has tried giving them novels to read, but so far it has been hard work motivating them to embrace the material, partly due to linguistic difficulties but also because of pure
disinterest. “There are short stories that I have found to work rather well with most students, but I feel I have not explored this area sufficiently yet”, he says. So far he has not used newspaper articles much either because he believes that most young people are not really interested in reading them. Why is it then that he has not looked beyond textbooks for inspiration or teaching opportunities during his five years in the job? “I feel that it takes up too much time and resources to come up with viable alternatives to the textbook, and so far I have not felt that my students have appreciated the extra effort on my behalf.”

However, after having found a new job recently, Jens has begun to use more and more music in his teaching. So far it has been an enormous success with students singing along, translating texts and filling in word gaps. This is a step in a new direction for Jens – one that he feels could lead to the incorporation of even more authentic materials in the future. Unlike his previous students, he feels that his new ones seem more interested in making an effort and taking responsibility for their own learning.

He points out that the process of moving from one method of teaching to another must be slow and steady, and not just for the sake of the students, but also for himself because of his inexperience with authentic materials.

6. Analysis

6.1 Interviewees on authentic materials

It is clear that my interviewees share Lundahl’s fairly simple and clear definition of what authentic materials is. This may be derived partly from the fact that I choose to introduce the concept to them along Lundahl’s lines and consequently the first of Breen’s four types of authenticity. As established, my interviewees have a combined experience of using everything from fairytales to technical industry manuals and other media such as music and television.

6.2 The usefulness of textbooks

Three interviewees, Paula, Bengt and Jens, all stated that they use textbooks, although of varying degrees. In order of textbook-usage, my impression is that Jens is the heaviest user,
Bengt coming in at second place and Paula third. And as we know, Irene does not use them at all since a long time back.

Jens and Bengt gave statements that indicate that they subscribe to Julio Foppoli’s idea that graded textbooks are especially useful when teachers want to focus on a specific language structure and subject students to it. Bengt was especially clear on the fact that this is where textbooks shine; they provide the teacher with fitting exercises that let students practice a variety of skills. Jens, Bengt and Paula are in accordance regarding another statement by Foppoli, that which points out how textbooks are particularly useful when teachers have little time for researching and preparing authentic materials. As seen above, Foppoli recommends that teachers use textbooks to present new topics and then turn to authentic materials to delve deeper into these topics, which is the exact approach that Bengt advocates. Jens’s experience that students find authentic materials (novels in this case) a bit on the difficult side correlates with Foppoli’s notion that students can make better sense of textbooks due to their throttled level of difficulty and it affirms Lundahl’s fear that literary works may not appeal to students.

My interpretation of the interviewees is that Paula and Bengt are positively disposed to this idea, while Jens prefers to move on to new textbook chapters and topics instead, which is on a direct collision course with George Vassilakis criticism against course books: “The sheer number of components available suggests that the course book package […] should not be in need of supplementation.”¹ This would indicate that Jens is acting the part of what Vassilakis calls a transmitter of content, which fails to “identify with classroom events.” However, knowing what we do of his recent disposition towards using authentic materials, it would be inaccurate to label Jens as a transmitter.

6.3 Second language acquisition

While Bengt and Jens, although at varying degrees, use authentic materials as complements to textbooks, Irene and Paula are obviously the true devotees to authentic materials. Let us see how their ideas correlate with the theories of Krashen’s.

Both of them teach mainly by having students communicate through speaking, reading and writing in connection to the authentic materials they have chosen to use. Looking

at Krashen’s acquisition-learning hypothesis, it is reasonably clear that both of them subscribe to the notion that second-language competency comes from *acquisition* rather than *learning*, *acquisition* being when language is acquired over time by being subjected to it. Both of them mention the importance of students and teachers enjoying themselves in the classroom and they go as far as saying that this is the key to successful acquisition of language skills. Irene’s quote, “They forget that they are in a situation where they are supposed to learn something [...]”, describes the immediate result of this approach and it corresponds well with Krashen’s notion of what makes for a low Affective Filter. The three critical factors to a low Affective Filter are, as seen above, high motivation, self-confidence and low levels of anxiety. She tries to convey to students that “there is nothing they can not do.” These contents of the quotes, in conjunction with the idea that students must enjoy themselves, work towards creative favourable circumstances regarding all of Krashen’s three critical factors. Although the exact terms such as anxiety, high motivation and self-confidence are not mentioned, they are implicitly included. This quote is also interesting from the perspective of Krashen’s Input Hypothesis.

Irene’s notion that she is teaching above her and her students’ level, along with the above-mentioned quote and the idea that students learn from treading in unfamiliar territories, signals a clear connection to Krashen’s Input Hypothesis which states that we learn languages when we are subjected to vocabulary and structures that we do not yet master. Although the connection is somewhat weaker, Paula points out that students get to use dictionaries instead of prepared word lists, indicating that they are active in overcoming obstacles which could be said to represent Krashen’s +1. Likewise, Bengt does not exactly say anything that can be directly tied to the Input Hypothesis, but reading between the lines it becomes clear that he provides the opportunities for students to encounter +1 while being exposed to authentic materials such as potentially advanced industrial manuals. Jens’s restricted use of short stories and television also provide +1 in a more limited fashion. Of all four, it was thus only Irene who, without prior knowledge of Krashen’s theories, made a direct connection to the Input Hypothesis. Such was also the case with the Monitor Hypothesis.

It is fairly clear from Irene’s statements that she believes that students become optimal Monitor users from using her teaching methods, Monitor being Krashen’s term for how active our editorial function is while communicating in a language that is not native to us. As pointed out, students should be able to switch off monitoring functions while engaging in conversation that demands spontaneous actions and reactions, which, once again, is
mentioned above by Irene. Paula, however, is alone in mentioning grammar in a way that touches on Krashen’s theories. Pointing out her experience in teaching, knowledge in how to explain grammar and the subsequent ability to teach spontaneously instead of in a structured form, she acknowledges Krashen’s notion that progress is derived from the medium rather than the message. On a non-grammar related note, this also characterizes Irene’s teaching philosophy.

Support for Jens and to a certain degree Bengt’s more traditional teaching methods can be found in the earlier cited criticism against Krashen which states that the lack of formal lessons during which rules are taught result in students’ lack of attention to the need for correct syntactic form.

Although the debate of learning versus acquisition is nothing new, I believe it deserves continuous attention and this paper is a part of that ambition. I think it would be very useful if teachers and future teachers would challenge their choices of materials and ultimately their teaching methods. To be aware of the various alternatives in teaching methods and one’s motives will probably improve teachers’ own satisfaction and pave the way for good study results among the students.

6.4 Limitations

Due to the limited number of interviewees, it is by means of this thesis not possible to draw any general conclusions regarding the pros and cons of using conventional teaching aids versus authentic materials in teaching English. Also, due to the interview technique, content varied between interviews in terms of what was brought up and discussed.

7. Conclusions

Whether conventional teaching aids or authentic materials are used seems to differ a lot between teachers depending on personal experiences and varying backgrounds. It seems natural for inexperienced teachers to embrace conventional teaching aids early on in their careers. With growing self-confidence and experience, other materials appear to displace textbooks and accessories to a certain degree. An important factor for successful teaching and learning is the level of enjoyment on behalf of students and teachers alike, regardless of what materials teachers present to their students. It is important for teachers to feel at home with the materials they have chosen to work with in order for students to benefit the most from them.
In the end, the interviewees seem to agree that authentic materials provide the most rewarding experience for students and teachers, but successful implementation is often time consuming which is when conventional teaching aids can sometimes be an appropriate choice. My own conclusion is that authentic materials provide teachers with a challenge and a never-ending source of inspiration and possibilities that has the power to keep the job interesting and rewarding for a long time.
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